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Conservatives for conservation

Effort to cut fuel consumption crosses political lines

Four years ago, Vice President Dick Cheney memorably portrayed energy conservation as a crusty, 1970s-era concept. "Conservation may be a sign of personal virtue," he declared, "but it is not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy."

Refreshingly, quite a few of his political allies are arguing the opposite these days.

The drill-drill-drill mentality is certainly alive and well on Capitol Hill, as demonstrated by the recent preliminary vote to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil rigs.

But a more progressive -- and realistic -- approach may be emerging from several remarkable new alliances between environmentalists and groups that ordinarily focus on religious and defense issues.

These organizations are uniting to promote a reduction in gasoline consumption as vital to national security.

"I just think reasonable people are more inclined right now to start thinking about ways our country's future isn't dependent on ... oil from a region where there are a lot of very bad actors," Gary Bauer, former head of the conservative Family Research Council, recently told *The Washington Post*.

Bauer and activists across the political spectrum have teamed up with the Natural Resources Defense Council and other environmentalists to create an alliance called Set America Free. They're lobbying the Bush administration and Congress to invest more money in encouraging the use of gas-electric hybrid vehicles and in exploring alternative-energy sources.

The goal is to ease America's reliance on imported oil, especially from volatile countries in the Middle East, and the far-off potential of mass-producing hydrogen fuel-cell cars isn't what the group has in mind.

"We have no time to wait for commercialization of immature technologies," the group says on its Web site. "The United States should implement technologies that exist today and are ready for widespread use."

Some of the options cited by the group, such as tapping coal reserves, are troubling. But others, such as continuing tax credits for hybrids and the promotion of "flexible fuel" vehicles that use ethanol or fuel blends, are worth pursuing.

These initiatives aren't likely to amount to much, however, unless the new alliances support efforts to require automakers to boost fuel efficiency.

Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and John Kerry, D-Mass., have tried repeatedly to win White House support for long-overdue upgrades in fuel-economy standards. In the interest of national security, President Bush needs to accelerate that change.
